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WANTED: A CITIZEN-BASED PUBLIC INTEREST
RESEARCH POLICY

by

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Ottawa

Summary of three background papers produced in 1976 for the National Advisory Council on Voluntary Action and funded by the Department of the Secretary of State. The text reflects the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Advisory Council or of the Department.

Assistance to Community
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Ottawa K1A 0M5

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INTRODUCTION

Proposals are submitted to the National Advisory Council on Voluntary Action in this essay for a citizen based research policy for Canada.

Accompanying material includes a summary of the results of interviews with various other researchers on their views of the major issues in voluntary sector research and a summary of a proposed project for a citizen's guide on voluntary sector research.

Lengthier notes on each of these topics have been deposited with the Council's staff.

The Council members making recommendations on voluntary research will want to ask themselves certain questions before setting out an actual list of proposals. Some questions they may wish to pose in this regard are:

- should recommendations be addressed to all the major social research agencies or exclusively directed to government?
To the federal government alone?
- should recommendations on voluntary research appear in a separate section of the Council's final report or be part of a general statement?
- should recommendations concentrate on the mechanical needs and/or the directions for future voluntary research?
- should recommendations specify a drastic or modest change in federal government voluntary research policy?
- should recommendations designate specific voluntary research tasks to existing voluntary research groups or advocate the creation of new agencies?
- would specific recommended voluntary research tasks be a means of carrying out other functions as put forward in other Council recommendations?
- should there be a public participation process to discuss voluntary research directions and problems before Council recommendations are made? Before any new federal policy is announced?
- should the Council give voluntary researchers access to its documentation and if so, where should Council records be deposited?

TOWARDS A POLICY FOR CITIZEN RESEARCH

Too often, social research is a status quo exercise without consumer involvement or use.

Citizen research offers a creative direction for social research. The essence of citizen research is examinations of community ideas, events and plans selected, implemented and reviewed by citizens and community groups.

Most social research is not undertaken by citizens or independent community groups, and it is not based on community needs. Instead, it is undertaken by institutions and agencies such as governments, industry and educational institutions, as a public relations tool or control device. These agencies simply give lip service to supporting spontaneous and citizen based research.

Governments, with their secrecy, restrictive funding, and support of corporate concentration in the communications field, are a chief barrier in the development of citizen based research. Industry is content to spend research funds on marketing and advertising, and makes little pretense of giving corporate donations to citizen researchers. Educational institutions seem more intent on meeting government and industry research needs than community needs. The media, dependent on advertising revenues, stress the sensational aspects of citizen action rather than using their communication channels as vehicles for citizens' communication. Social service agencies appear to be more intent on gathering confidential client information and preparing non-critical self evaluation studies as a means of increasing citizen dependency on their services, than on supporting consumer oriented research.

Some citizen groups and individuals are beginning to develop consumer oriented data on neighbourhood planning, industrial regulation, land reform, environmental impact and international development and are becoming a significant source of alternate ideas, hard hitting and productive public interest research.

Those conducting citizen research face several basic problems. One is the growing difficulty of obtaining information as government, industry and social service agencies refuse accessibility to many of their records on the grounds of confidentiality. It is especially ironic that citizen researchers are denied access to information these agencies gather on citizen groups.

It is equally difficult for citizen researchers to obtain published materials from these agencies, particularly if such materials are not made widely available, or distributed at a low cost. Nor do citizen research groups have equal access to the regular media, or control their own research production and communications systems.

Citizen researchers lack the funding and facilities that more established agency researchers have access to. They cannot, usually, afford the costs associated with coordinating and carrying out research, particularly if they have limited incomes, and not even a subsistence research budget for transportation and day care costs. Restricted to inadequate, and short term government funding sources, most citizen groups find it difficult to find the resources to train new researchers, monitor community events or conduct specific investigations.

It is no easy task to "build in" citizen involvement in research projects; to rely primarily on non-paid volunteers and to be able to use an action research process as part of a successful strategy for community change. It is far easier to rely on established agencies' information, funding, and proposals for community problem solving.

While agency research is viewed by many citizens as elitist and counter-productive, there is also a danger that citizen-based public interest research groups can become too far removed from community control and not make maximum use of the volunteer research talents of the average citizen.

A redistribution of resources so that citizen research will be on an equal footing with agencies conducting social research cannot be realized without public support and pressure. Governments must be enabled to recognize citizen research and organizations through supportive legislation and regulations.

The main vehicle proposed for furthering citizen-based research is the non-profit public interest research centre. Such centres would be established by (and accountable to) community people to conduct independent research, train citizen researchers and facilitate public discussion and action on research findings.

Public interest research centres would also require an independent funding base. Their functions would likely include monitoring community issues and conducting social audits of various agencies and institutions. Already there are several variations of such centres in existence, operated primarily by environmental and student campus groups.

Some of the components of a program for strengthening citizen based research in Canada are submitted here for public debate and action. Proposals for a model citizen research policy for Canada are:

1. That non-profit public interest research centres, through an amendment to the Income Tax Act, be permitted a tax credit system for individual donations similar to that granted by Revenue Canada to Canadian political parties.
2. That citizen representatives, nominated by public interest research centres, sit on the managing boards of major federal and provincial research councils.
3. That there be specially trained staff in the Department of Supply and Services and in provincial counterpart agencies to help receive, consider and refer unsolicited proposals from citizen researchers.
4. That the Canada Council Explorations Program be vastly expanded and its terms of reference broadened to allow support for individual citizen researchers.
5. That federal-provincial social welfare legislation be amended to provide assistance to those in need, to meet reasonable personal expenses in carrying out citizen research projects.
6. That, in order to facilitate citizen research activities, federal-provincial authorities enact freedom of information, privacy, corporate disclosure and corrective advertising omnibus legislation.
7. That a federal-provincial support program be established to create local community secretariats to provide citizen researchers with access to typing, translation, duplication and other research aids.
8. That federal-provincial legislation be enacted, with start-up funds, to enable the development of a national network of cooperative non-profit

printing, video, computer production and distribution centers for the communication of citizen research.

9. That a publishing aid program similar to that operated by the Canada Council be established to allow for increased publication of citizen research and expansion of the number of community reading rooms receiving such Canadian produced materials (preferably in the language requested).
10. That the National Library, along with provincial and local libraries and community information centers, be given responsibilities to act as accessible depositories for citizen research, listing such research annually in "Canadiana" and issuing more frequent checklists of completed and ongoing citizen research.

The vehicles and policies for effective citizen research are only part of a program of action needed for a participatory economy in Canada. There are vehicles other than public interest centres for strengthening independent community organizations such as cooperatives and community economic corporations. There are other useful legislative initiatives in addition to those suggested above for implementing industrial democracy practices and for initiating public sector operations of essential services. Citizen research carried out through public interest research centres and by individual citizens can be a means of strengthening voluntary action, improving Canada's development as a socially responsible nation and ensuring greater accountability for Canadian institutions.

SUMMARY OF VOLUNTARY RESEARCHERS' OPINIONS*

Voluntary sector research has to be restructured and move away from being simply supportive of the status quo. There are, however, differences of opinion as to whether voluntary sector research should exclusively be investigations advocating the public interest as opposed to also being examinations of existing voluntary groups. There was agreement that much voluntary sector research has a middle class bias.

Inadequate funding was the main reason given for voluntary sector research problems. There was a general belief that existing government funding is far too restrictive and limited. What was needed was an independent accountable funding agency with adequate resources to dispense.

The other main problem cited in voluntary sector research was the growing restrictions on voluntary sector information flow. Government again was seen as part of the problem with its penchant for secrecy. The answers to this problem were less government "in-house" research and better publicity channels to disseminate voluntary research results. It would also be helpful if there was the co-ordinating means for reporting on all types of voluntary sector research findings.

There was a difference of opinion as to whether academics were in a position to do the relevant research needed. Many of those interviewed believed that citizen groups could play the key role in future

* Twenty researchers from differing backgrounds and locales were interviewed.

voluntary sector research. There was some agreement that those carrying out voluntary sector research should utilize the methods developed in action research, community self studies, and public interest research. This in turn meant a greater citizen involvement in voluntary sector research undertakings. Special assistance would be needed to allow low income groups the opportunity to carry out their own research.

There should be a policy developed to strengthen Canadian produced voluntary sector research that gives voluntary sector groups adequate resources to carry out independent research, with as much input from the public as possible.

SUMMARY OF DOCUMENTATION NEEDS OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR RESEARCH

A guide booklet on how to undertake voluntary sector research should be published. Its contents should include sections on issues in voluntary sector research, sources for voluntary sector information, examples of different types of voluntary sector research and suggestions on the production and distribution of voluntary sector research results.

The final essay touches on some of the potential content for such a guide on how to do voluntary research.

It is hoped that a guide booklet would help encourage more Canadian voluntary sector groups to carry out research and be used as well by educators, librarians and other information resource people.

The closest example of an existing Canadian guide booklet is Pollution Probe (Toronto)'s Corporate Research Guide now being revised for the third time, to be available from the New Hogtown Press (12 Hart House Circle, University of Toronto).



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